

A Cinematic-Story Paradigm for Analyzing Biblical Narrative

The rise of narrative criticism in the 1970s and 1980s represented a significant advance in biblical scholarship in that it supplied a new paradigm for analyzing biblical narrative. It prompted scholars to consider such aspects as plot and characterization, features of narrative texts that had never received serious attention previously. But a major critique has been that, in comparison to other critical methodologies of the twentieth century, narrative criticism has not yet yielded as much into the interpretation of biblical texts as it could.

For the purposes of comparison, let us consider the impact made by the advent of New Testament redaction criticism. In the late 1940s, Gospel scholars took the source-critical findings that the Gospel of Mark was the earliest of the canonical Gospels and a source that both Matthew and Luke used, and started to explore the implications of these interconnections. They reasoned that the changes Matthew and Luke made may have been predicated on providing different theological implications to their versions of passages borrowed from

Mark, and so, a study of the changes could yield insights into the theologies of Matthew and Luke. This represented a game-changer in the history of Gospel studies in that it opened the door to a significant yield of fresh insights into these texts.

The impact of redaction criticism rests on a basic insight: “editorial changes may reflect evangelists’ theology.” Similarly, narrative criticism may need some basic insight to provide the impetus for an interpretation-oriented approach that would prove more productive than application of the discipline has been thus far. The present volume endeavors to offer just such a basic insight: “reading a biblical narrative text is akin to *watching a movie*.” Both reading and watching involve encountering a story, and while the two stories may be quite different in content and style, they both reflect certain features that are basic to all stories, ancient or modern. These features as they appear in film are second nature to us owing to the voluminous exposure we have to movies and television in our culture. Our thousands of hours of screen time have conditioned our brains with a *story paradigm* such that we know implicitly how the story of a movie works and how we are expected to interact with it. This conditioning of our brains should constitute an invaluable resource for the task of studying the stories set forth in the narrative portions of the Bible. With the story paradigm gained from all of our cinematic exposure practically imprinted in our DNA, we should be naturals at analyzing biblical stories in a similar manner.

What I am proposing builds upon the narrative-critical movement of the past four decades, and it may help us to remember the way in which that movement came about. Narrative criticism originally arose as a reaction against the tendency of historical-critical methodologies—like form criticism and redaction criticism—to atomize biblical narrative material, breaking it down into small pieces of text, and working with them in isolation from each other. The result was that any sense of a biblical story as a unified whole was lost. Scholars recognized this problem and worked to equip themselves for the task of analyzing biblical stories *as stories* by digging into literary

scholarship on the modern novel. This endeavor was fraught with challenges, however. First, the literary-critical paradigm they were attempting to master was inherently incompatible with the historical-critical paradigm with which they had been trained. Further, the literary-critical resources to which they most often turned for how to analyze stories were oriented toward providing comprehensive lists of the options available to storytellers in their crafting of the various literary components that make up a story—for example, that a character can be flat or round. Such resources, however, had little to offer on the interpretive significance of these options, that is, on how the choice of one option over another might make a difference in how readers interpret a narrative text. The present work posits the use of the *cinematic-story paradigm* (introduced above) as a next step in the development of a narrative-critical approach capable of discerning the interpretive significance of particular narrative moves in biblical passages.

This chapter is dedicated to unveiling components of this paradigm. Further, the description of each is accompanied by a cinematic example illustrating that component; if a picture is worth a thousand words, imagine how many words a *moving picture* would be worth. Of course, because our ultimate interest is the study of biblical narrative, the treatment of each insight will also be accompanied by an illustration of how that insight influences the analysis of a biblical narrative passage. It is hoped that the paradigm established in this chapter will equip biblical narrative critics to take the analysis of biblical stories to a new level.

Every Movie Creates Its Own Story-World

With some movies, it is obvious that the producers have set out to create a world that viewers can recognize as distinct from the real world. This is certainly the case with Peter Jackson's cinematic adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. From the very start of the first installment, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), it is clear Jackson has crafted a world intended to be understood as something

other than the real world of the viewers. In the opening scene's provision of the backstory for the tale to come, the viewers are informed that the world they are about to encounter contains not only humans, but also elves and dwarves, and a map is presented showing details of a place labeled "Middle Earth," a place that does not exist in the real world.

Of course, the vast majority of movies do not have worlds clearly distinguishable from the real world. Someone might say that not every movie creates its own story-world, because some movies simply use the real world of the viewers as the setting for their stories. However, a closer look at the concept of *story-world* will reveal that this perception is not really sustainable.

1. *A movie's story-world is intended as a self-contained entity separate from the real world.*

Moviemakers always conceptualize the story-worlds of their movies as self-contained entities, distinct from the real world of the moviegoers. While this may be more obvious with fantasy films (like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), it is also true when the world on the screen looks like the real world outside the movie theater.

A look at the Jackie Chan action flick *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) should help to clarify this point. As the title indicates, the story of this movie is set in New York City, so the filmmaker intends that viewers consider this city to be the story-world of the film. Nevertheless, in my personal viewing of the movie, it became obvious that the filmmaker intends viewers to consider this story-world as a self-contained entity separate from the real world. As I watched the film, I began noticing landmarks of Vancouver, British Columbia, the city in which I grew up. Therefore, we have a situation where the viewers are intended to consider the story-world they are seeing to be New York City, but what they are actually seeing is not the real-world New York City. This being the case, for the viewers to consider this story-world as New York City, they must accept it as a self-contained entity separate from the real-world New York City.

Would it make any difference if a movie set in New York City is

actually shot in New York City? That is the case with *Wall Street* (1987), the account of a young Wall Street trader trying to make his way in the world of high finance. With this film, the Statue of Liberty of the story-world is the Statue of Liberty of the real world. The Central Park of the story-world is the Central Park of the real world. The Tavern on the Green of the story-world is the Tavern on the Green of the real world. It would appear at first glance that with this movie, there is no longer a need for the viewers to consider the story-world of the film as a self-contained entity separate from the real world. A film's story-world is not just its physical setting, however, but also encompasses the characters and events of the story, and the story-world of *Wall Street* contains people like the fictional Bud Fox and Gordon Gekko, and an event like the sale of a fictional company called Bluestar Airlines, thus distinguishing the story-world of *Wall Street* from the real world of the viewers.

So, then, we might concede it is necessary to consider cinematic story-worlds as self-contained entities separate from the real world when we are dealing with movies presenting fictional storylines, but what about movies based on actual historical events? In response to this question, it is useful to take a look at just such a film, *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), the account of the career of brilliant mathematician John Nash.

A comparison of the movie with the actual details of Nash's biography reveals that while the film does follow the basic contours of his adult life, it deviates quite markedly in places. One of these places is the way the film depicts Nash's descent into paranoid schizophrenia. He is shown getting instructions from a Department of Defense officer to monitor print media for hidden patterns in furtherance of the Soviet Union's Cold War efforts. As it turns out, Nash's discerning of patterns, and even his conversations with the D.O.D. officer, are actually delusions associated with his undiagnosed schizophrenia. The real John Nash did suffer from schizophrenia, and this did result in his believing he was receiving messages from print media. The real-world John Nash, however, did not believe them to be messages related to

Soviet plots but, rather, messages from aliens. Here, the story-world of the film is shown to be something separate from the real world, and such would be the case even with biopics that work diligently to remain true to the historical facts; there will always be points where the cinematic version diverges from actual history.

Reviews of a biopic inevitably address the degree to which the movie remains true to the facts, but divergences from the facts do not bring about negative evaluations, for biopics are held to a different set of standards than are documentaries on real-world people. Specifically, the story-worlds of movies are considered self-contained entities separate from the real world, and so divergences from the facts are a nonissue for the purposes of evaluation. Further, this is a part of story theory in general, and so, for the purposes of narrative analysis, the story-worlds of even *biblical narrative* passages are to be considered as self-contained entities separate from the real world. This, of course, means that all historical-critical issues are to be bracketed out; whether a biblical text is a faithful representation of what actually happened or whether it presents a total fabrication is simply not at issue.

At first glance, this may appear to be an untenable position, but a simple exercise should allay any doubts as to its veracity. For the purposes of this exercise, we shall use Alberto Soggin's treatment of the Joshua 6 account of the fall of Jericho. In addressing the findings of archaeological excavations of Jericho, he notes that work during the first third of the twentieth century uncovered a defensive system consisting of a strong rampart structure that had fallen as if the victim of an earthquake, and it is dated to between 1450 and 1250 BCE, which is consistent with the traditional view that its destruction occurred as part of the Israelite invasion. He then goes on to point out that later excavations in the 1950s revealed that other defensive systems had been constructed on top of the ruins of the fallen rampart structure, systems that date to the third millennium, thus indicating that the rampart structure must have fallen at least half a millennium earlier than the arrival of the Israelites. Soggin further notes that these later

excavation efforts found no trace of a massive wall from the time period when the miracle of Joshua 6 was to have taken place.¹ In his view, the account of Joshua 6 is the result of “artificial rehistoricization . . . replac[ing] a narrative of the capture of Jericho by armed attack and with the aid of a ruse.”²

Soggin’s analysis indicates there is a marked difference between the report of Joshua 6 and what actually happened in the late Bronze Age at the site of Jericho, and this is a significant observation from a historical-critical perspective. But does this hold any significance for a narrative analysis of Joshua 6? A narrative analysis of this text has as its focus the narrative workings of the passage, matters such as how the plot is developed and through whose point of view the events are presented to the readers. For analyses such as these, it does not matter whether the events presented actually occurred or not; the exact same narrative analysis is performed in either case. A narrative analysis sees the Joshua text as creating a story-world that is a self-contained entity and, as such, not open to evaluation on how much, or how little, it reflects elements of the real world. To put it simply, all historical-critical considerations are bracketed out in the process of conducting a narrative-critical analysis.

2. The story-worlds of movies treating the same historical event are discrete entities and, as such, are to be considered totally separate from each other.

Historical events deemed worthy of cinematic treatment sometimes give rise to multiple movies, and it is not uncommon for such movies to be compared to each other. Further, when we do so, we seem to know intuitively that each movie is to be taken as a discrete entity. This is evident in the way we have no problem when details in one movie differ from the corresponding details in the other; we recognize intuitively that each film is creating its own story-world characterized by its own details, and so the story-worlds of the two films will not necessarily be identical.

1. J. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary*, trans. R. A. Wilson, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 85–86.

2. *Ibid.*, 84.

Further, because of our recognition that each movie has its own discrete story-world, we would see it as illegitimate to use a detail from a particular event's depiction in one of the movies in an analysis of that same event in the other version. For example, consider two film adaptations of the running career of Steve Prefontaine, one of the greatest middle-distance runners of all time: *Without Limits* (1998), directed by Robert Towne, and *Prefontaine* (1997), directed by Steve James. Not surprisingly, both of these movies cover Prefontaine's participation in the 5000-meter event at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, arguably the most important race of his life. However, the two films present differing depictions of Prefontaine's attitude heading into the race. In *Without Limits*, Towne's coverage of the runners lining up for the race includes a cut to a bar back in the U.S.A., showing friends of Prefontaine gathered around a television watching the runners line up. Over this image, a portion of an interview Prefontaine had given earlier is heard, in which he says, "I'd like to work it out so that in the end, it comes down to a pure guts race . . . if it is, I'm the only one who can win it." So, Towne portrays Prefontaine as being confident, even bordering on cocky, heading into the race.

James, on the other hand, depicts Prefontaine as having an entirely different attitude. He includes a scene showing Prefontaine in a lounge in the athletes' quarters with a number of his American teammates days before the big race, and they are all watching a live broadcast of the men's 10,000-meter final. In this scene, there is a shot of a TV screen showing the three lead runners heading into the final lap of the race, with Finland's Lasse Viren out front. The camera cuts to a wide-eyed Prefontaine leaning toward the screen and saying, "This is unbelievable . . . he's going after the record." The camera cuts back to the TV screen which now shows Viren and the second-place runner coming off the final turn into the home stretch, and follows Viren as he pulls away for a convincing win. Then there is a cut back to Prefontaine staring at the screen with his mouth hanging open as the race announcer's voice is heard to say ". . . that breaks the world record of 27:39.4 . . . ," at which point Prefontaine breaks his stare at the

screen as a distant look comes over his face. The camera then cuts back to the TV screen to show Viren being congratulated by another runner, with a commentator's voice saying, "I'll tell you, Jim, there's one man in these stands that had better be worried having watched this race, and that's Steve Prefontaine," at which point the camera cuts back to Prefontaine snapping out of his funk to look back at the screen. Then the camera captures one of his teammates turning to look over his shoulder at Prefontaine and then pans to three other teammates already looking at him, before returning to Prefontaine, whose face exhibits a look of consternation.

As we can see, the directors present two contrasting depictions of how Prefontaine feels as he anticipates his participation in the upcoming race. Suppose the following was offered as an analysis of the first, Towne's version: "Towne's depiction of Prefontaine here makes him appear confident about his chances in the race. However, based on what we see in James's portrayal of him, the confidence evident in Towne's version must be understood as a mere façade, a brave face Prefontaine is putting on lest Viren get wind of how concerned he really is about the showdown." This analysis would immediately be deemed illegitimate, and its problem lies in its failure to recognize that every movie creates its own discrete story-world. As far as the case at hand is concerned, Towne's *Without Limits* creates a particular story-world, a world that is a discrete entity and, as such, free from the intrusion of factors not a part of this entity. In Towne's story-world, the protagonist is confident going into his big race, and details from other story-worlds cannot be imported into Towne's story-world, no matter how compelling they may appear.

With our finely attuned cinematic sensibilities, it is clear to us that such a move is illegitimate. Our biblical storytelling sensibilities may not be as finely attuned, however, and as a result, we may not be as quick to notice when a move like this occurs in the interpretation of biblical narrative material. Consider, for example, John MacArthur's treatment of the first beatitude of Luke's Sermon on the Plain, "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). MacArthur asserts that "Jesus was

not teaching that those who are materially and economically poor are thereby blessed. As *Matthew's parallel account of this sermon indicates*, the Lord was speaking of those who are 'poor in spirit' (Matt 5:3). The blessed are those who understand their spiritual poverty and the bankrupt condition of their soul, no matter how much or how little wealth they possess."³

In his efforts to determine the meaning of Luke's "Blessed are you who are poor," MacArthur lifts the words "in spirit" from Matthew's version and incorporates them into his analysis of Luke's version, an analysis yielding the idea that Luke has in mind *spiritual* poverty. In doing so, however, MacArthur is taking a component used in the building of Matthew's story-world, and inserting it into Luke's separate story-world, a world that possesses a beatitude addressed simply to the poor, and not to the *spiritually* poor. Recognition of the fact that each biblical narrative has its own discrete story-world precludes such an interpretative move.

3. *A movie's story-world is intended to be experienced and not just viewed.*

While it is generally understood that movies are watched, it is possible, at a deeper level, to conceive of movies as being *experienced*. This distinction is not referring to movie-theater innovations such as shaking seats, sprays of water, and gusts of scent to provide moviegoers with more than just the video and audio of conventional movies but, rather, the phenomenon of viewers finding themselves becoming participants in the story-world of a movie. To be sure, viewers may not consciously sense this happening, but as they are sitting in a movie theater and become engrossed in the action of the movie, they go from being simply viewers to being actual experiencers of the action.

It may not be initially clear how this phenomenon relates to the interpretation of biblical narrative texts, for reading words on a page does not provide the same kind of experience as watching a movie. But lovers of fiction know that in reading a novel they, too, can become lost

3. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Luke 6-10* (Chicago: Moody, 2011), 96 (emphasis added).

in the story's world. Further, it must be remembered that the stories of the Bible were not written with reading audiences in mind. Rather, they were written to be recited to *hearing* audiences.⁴ And while oral stories also do not have images to watch on a screen, because story hearers do not need to keep their eyes occupied with words on a page, they therefore have more latitude to allow their imaginations to be let loose in the story-worlds they are hearing.

The film *Jesus* (1979) contains a scene demonstrating this phenomenon of a hearer becoming lost in the world of a story. The film's treatment of Jesus delivering the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) begins with the camera focused on Jesus in the midst of a crowd of people. As he begins to tell the parable, the camera pans down to a girl sitting at his feet and captures her looking away from Jesus into the distance as the scene dissolves into an image of a beaten man lying on a road, upon whom come a priest and a Levite, and then a Samaritan who stops and helps the man. As the parable draws to a close, the image of the road dissolves back to the scene of the girl sitting at Jesus' feet, thus showing her leaving the world of the story and reentering the real world.

This scene provides a cinematic depiction of the phenomenon of a hearer being transported from his or her real world into the story-world of an oral story, inhabiting that world for the duration of the story, and then being transported back into their real world at the conclusion of the story. Further, a look at what happens next provides an indication of the significance of this dynamic for the process of interpreting biblical narrative. As Jesus presents his concluding question about who is a neighbor to the injured man, the camera focuses on the girl still at Jesus' feet and captures her responding, "The one who was kind to him." The producers here deviate from the text of Luke 10, which states it is a lawyer who gives this answer. By having the girl do so, they create the impression it was the girl's entering the story-world of Jesus' parable and experiencing firsthand the events

4. Despite this finding, the intended audience of biblical narratives texts will, for the sake of simplicity, be designated "readers," as opposed to "hearers," throughout the rest of the present volume.

occurring there that had an impact on her to the extent she was then equipped to answer Jesus' question about who was neighbor to the injured man.

This stands as an illustration of the significance of the narrative-critical concept of *story-world*. It is not a term simply designating the setting of a story's action but, rather, the *destination* of the members of a story's audience as they become engaged in the story. Though they may know they are sitting in a movie theater, or curled up with a novel, they need to allow their imaginations the freedom to be transported into the world of the story, and this requires a *suspension of disbelief*. This is a concept usually associated with a willingness on the part of the members of a story's audience to suspend their disbelief in elements of the story known not to reflect reality. It also applies, however, to how viewers of a movie or readers of a novel need to suspend their disbelief that they are no longer sitting in a movie theater or an easy chair. And with this suspension of disbelief, they are free to let themselves loose in the story-world of the story they are experiencing.

The intention behind the members of an audience becoming transported into a story-world is that what they experience there will have an impact on them, and thus they will emerge out of their experience in the story-world as changed people. This being the case, the interpretation of any biblical narrative passage must have as one of its objectives determining the nature of the impact the audience is intended to experience. The impact could consist of the imparting of a new understanding, as with the girl in *Jesus*, or a prompting toward a change in behavior. None of this is new, as it simply represents the theological and ethical emphases that already dominate the study of biblical narrative. There is another form of impact to be considered, however, and we turn again to the world of film to begin our exploration of it.

4. *An important component of a viewer's experience of a movie's story-world is its affective dimension.*

Moviemakers often craft their movies with an eye to how they might make an impact on their viewers emotionally. In fact, whole genres of